

[Brent Curtis, Rutland Herald](#)

Congressman Peter Welch didn't wait long to react to concerns he heard about the mental hardships returning veterans endure. A week after attending a roundtable discussion in Rutland on veteran mental health services, Welch said he introduced legislation Wednesday that would make access to counseling cheaper and more convenient.

"I want to encourage veterans to get the services they need, when they need them, in a fashion that's affordable and convenient," Welch said. "It's as simple as that."

To accomplish that goal, Welch said he is proposing the elimination of co-payments for soldiers seeking counseling and he wants to make over-the-phone counseling available to Vermonters who may have trouble traveling to a U.S. Veterans Affairs medical center or are reluctant to seek out help for fear of being stigmatized.

Welch said he drafted the bill — the Veterans Telehealth Improvement Act — after hearing from VA officials and local veterans who talked at length at the Rutland VFW Post 648 about the mental toll of combat.

"Many soldiers don't come forward for at least 12 years but their lives suffer from it," Welch said. "No one who hasn't been there can fully understand living day-in and day-out in an environment that, once you're outside the wire, there exists a reasonable chance that you could die. The stress is unrelenting."